Not so long ago—fewer than 100 years—cattle were raised very simply. They roamed freely in pastures, eating grass at will, and remained free of routine drugs. Now, most cows are raised on “factory farms,” large-scale operations that confine them to pens and fatten them quickly for slaughter by feeding them large quantities of grain.

Here’s the problem: cows are designed to eat grass, not grains. When they’re raised on a diet of other foods, such as soy, corn, and grains, the resulting beef is nutritionally inferior. Factory-farming practices also contribute to environmental destruction, and the cows suffer deeply and unnecessarily. Now, as grass-fed beef becomes increasingly available, you can eat beef in a more traditional manner. Here’s why you should:

1. It has a better fat profile. Grass-fed beef is considerably lower in fat than grain-fed beef; most cuts have about the same amount of fat as skinless chicken. It is also lower in calories: a 6-ounce piece of grass-fed beef has 100 fewer calories than the same amount of grain-fed beef. Other animals—bison, lamb, and goats—should also be raised on grass, rather than grain, with many of the same benefits.

2. It is nutritionally superior. Grass-fed beef is higher in omega-3 fatty acids and contains a compound called conjugated linoleic acid, a fatty acid that can reduce cancer risk. And it’s higher in vitamin E, a potent antioxidant. Grass-fed meat is more expensive than factory-farmed meat, but maybe that’s a good thing. We’re not supposed to eat nearly as much meat as we do. Maybe it’s time to start focusing on quality, not quantity.

3. It is (almost always) free of antibiotics and growth hormones. Routine antibiotics used to prevent widespread disease in confined cattle end up in the meat we eat, and contribute to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria that threaten humans. Cows are also fed growth hormones to speed the time from birth to slaughter. These, too, end up in the animal’s meat, and can cause serious health problems.

4. It is vastly more humane. When eating grains, cattle develop a number of painful and dangerous conditions, including feedlot bloat—which can cause suffocation—and acidosis, a condition that leads to diarrhea, ulcers, and liver disease. Neither are cows adapted to being confined to pens only a bit larger than their bodies, or packed so closely together in feedlots that they can scarcely move.

5. It is more environmentally sound. Raising cows on a diet of grains has devastating environmental consequences. For example, growing corn to feed livestock requires enormous amounts of fossil fuel and chemical fertilizers, and confining the animals creates vast amounts of ground and water pollution.
The recipes featured in this article have been excerpted with permission from *The Prairie Table Cookbook* by Bill Kurtis with Michelle M. Martin. All recipes have been designed with the use of grass-fed beef in mind.
Rib-Eye Steaks

Serves 4

A simple marinade gives these steaks intense, deep flavor.

1/2 cup low-sodium soy sauce
1/2 cup sliced green onions
1/4 cup packed organic brown sugar
2 cloves garlic, minced (2 tsp.)
1/4 tsp. ground ginger
1/4 tsp. pepper
2 lb. grass-fed, free-range rib-eye steaks

1. Combine soy sauce, onions, brown sugar, garlic, ginger, and pepper in large resealable bag. Add steaks. Seal bag, and turn to coat steak with marinade. Refrigerate 8 hours or overnight.

2. Drain and discard marinade. Grill steaks, uncovered, over medium-high heat 8–10 minutes or until meat reaches desired doneness (for medium-rare: 145°F; medium: 160°F; well-done: 170°F).

PER SERVING: 477 CAL; 45 G PROT; 30 G TOTAL FAT; (13 G SAT FAT); 4 G CARB; 113 MG CHOL; 338 MG SOD; 0 G FIBER; 3 G SUGARS

RESOURCES ON GRASS-FED MEAT
- The Food Revolution by John Robbins (foodrevolution.org).
- Pasture Perfect by Jo Robinson (eatwild.com).
- The Humane Society of the United States, Factory Farming Campaign (hsus.org/farm).
Grilled Beef Tenderloin Cobb Salad

Serves 4

For a heartier meal, grilled beef replaces Cobb Salad’s traditional chicken.
(Adapted from a recipe by Charlie Trotter.)

Vinaigrette
1 shallot, minced (¼ cup)
1 Tbs. freshly squeezed lemon juice
3 Tbs. olive oil
1 Tbs. chopped fresh chives

Salad
½ cup peeled and diced red and yellow tomatoes
4 cups mesclun mix
2 slices prosciutto, julienned
2 eggs, soft-boiled, peeled, and chopped
4 oz. beef tenderloin, grilled, cooled, and diced
½ cup diced avocado
½ cup crumbled blue cheese
12 grilled scallions, chilled and chopped
4 Tbs. chives, cut into 1-inch pieces

To make Vinaigrette:
Place shallot and lemon juice in small bowl. Slowly whisk in olive oil, fold in chives, and season to taste with salt and pepper.

To make Salad:
1. Toss tomatoes with half of Vinaigrette. Season to taste with salt and pepper; set aside.
2. Toss mesclun mix with remaining Vinaigrette, and season to taste with salt and pepper.
3. Arrange some mesclun mix to create bed in center of each plate. Arrange some prosciutto in vertical line along far left side of greens. Next to prosciutto, arrange some of eggs, beef, avocado, tomatoes, cheese, and scallions in individual vertical lines to cover mesclun mix. Top with ground black pepper and sprinkle with chives.

Bistec Encebollado

(Slivered Beef with Well-Browned Onions)
Serves 4

Try this rich, savory taco filling for your next casual supper.
Recipe by Rick Bayless (originally printed in Authentic Mexican)

1 lb. thin-cut flank steak or skirt steak, trimmed
3 Tbs. vegetable or olive oil
1 large onion, diced (2 cups)
2 large cloves garlic, minced (2 tsp.)
1 Tbs. finely chopped fresh chives
½ cup diced avocado
½ cup crumbled blue cheese
12 grilled scallions, chilled and chopped
4 Tbs. chives, cut into 1-inch pieces

To make Vinaigrette:
Place shallot and lemon juice in small bowl. Slowly whisk in olive oil, fold in chives, and season to taste with salt and pepper.

To make Salad:
1. Toss tomatoes with half of Vinaigrette. Season to taste with salt and pepper; set aside.
2. Toss mesclun mix with remaining Vinaigrette, and season to taste with salt and pepper.
3. Arrange some mesclun mix to create bed in center of each plate. Arrange some prosciutto in vertical line along far left side of greens. Next to prosciutto, arrange some of eggs, beef, avocado, tomatoes, cheese, and scallions in individual vertical lines to cover mesclun mix. Top with ground black pepper and sprinkle with chives.

PER SERVING: 463 CAL; 19 G PROT; 41 G TOTAL FAT (14 G SAT FAT); 5 G CARB; 81 MG CHOL; 370 MG SOD; 1 G FIBER; 2 G SUGARS

COOK’S NOTES
Minor variations on the theme:
• The meat may be marinated.
• Red onions may replace white.
• Four cloves of roasted garlic could be used instead of raw ones.
• Strips of just about any roasted and peeled chile pepper could be stirred in with the meat.

Learn the label lingo

Now that most of us know about the profound differences in natural and commercially raised food animals, meats sport a variety of (often confusing) labels. Here’s what they mean:

• Grass-fed. Per the USDA’s definition, grass-fed beef comes from an animal that gets all its nutrition from forage; grains and soy are not allowed. There are no stipulations regarding the use of hormones, routine antibiotics, or confinement. According to the more comprehensive and soon-to-be-announced definition of the American Grassfed Association, a producer group, grass-fed meat comes from an animal that is raised exclusively on forage, is never confined, is not treated with antibiotics or growth hormones, and is treated humanely from birth to market. Sustainable agricultural practices are also required.

• Free-range. This term applies to poultry, not beef, and simply means that the birds have outdoor access. However, no guarantees are made as to frequency, duration, or quality of land access.

• Natural. Natural simply means the meat contains no artificial ingredients or added color, and is only minimally processed. It doesn’t mean the animal is free of hormones or antibiotics.

• Organic. Organic beef comes from an animal that’s raised on organic feed (which may be corn, grain, or soy). Organic animals must have access to outdoors; treatment with hormones or routine antibiotics is prohibited. “The fact that most animals raised for the organic label are fed significant amounts of grain and other feeds means the meat does not have all the health benefits of grass-fed beef,” says Robinson. The best label to look for: organic, grass-fed.